

COHERENCE IN LITERARY NARRATIVES

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Coherence, as a basic standard of textuality, is achieved by text linguistic factors and compositional patterns. Drawing on an interdisciplinary approach that combines text linguistics, cognitive and narrative concerns, the article reviews the principles of text coherence, i.e. the standards of time, causality, thematic unity and continuity, and focuses on literary narratives characterized by various degrees of coherence. It explores the impact of narrative aspects and categories, such as temporal organization, frequency and plot completeness on the reader's mental contribution in perceiving local and global coherence in the course of interpreting texts. Further exploiting the challenges to text coherence, it argues that establishing unity in literary texts relies on the receiver's background knowledge, his or her ability to draw inferences, fill in ellipsis and retrieve contextually relevant information.

Key-words: coherence relations, cohesion, thematic unity, plot completeness, inference

As a text linguistic notion, coherence denotes the properties in the structure and architectonics of a text that motivate readers to deem the identified textual parts as all contributing to a whole and making sense, not just being an arbitrary set of sentences [8]. According to Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang U. Dressler, coherence concerns the ways in which the components of the textual world (concepts, relations among them and their relations to the external world) are established and developed [1]. The world of the literary work may or may not agree with the established version of the "real world", termed also as the actual world. Interpreting textual worlds requires the meaning of expressions in the surface text and common sense knowledge based on the readers' expectations and experience regarding the organization of events and situations [1].

Linguistically, coherence is ensured by lexical and grammatical structures, i.e. *cohesion* (anaphoric relations, recurrence, partial recurrence, etc.), norms of paragraphing and paragraph structure. Coherence is the general aboutness, it is the development which provides a text with the necessary unity. Cohesive links explain how the sentences of a text hang together, but

cohesion itself is not enough to deem the text a meaningful unit. It is possible to invent a sentence sequence that is highly cohesive but nonetheless incoherent:

A week has seven days. Every day I feed my cat. Cats have four legs. The cat is on the mat. Mat has three letters.

Although the sequence of sentences is characterized by lexical cohesion, as the last word of every sentence is reiterated in the subsequent one, the given example does not represent a logical concatenated text. The repeated words denote different entities. The occurrence is devoid of any unifying idea, and therefore is incoherent.

Coherence is also encoded by coherence relations including cause-consequence, contrast, evidence, concession, result, etc. between the sentences or clauses of the text. Below follow some examples of such coherence relations. The relations are explicitly signaled by means of words like *although*, *and*, *but*, *at last*.

He had been completely idle at Oxford; although his father had given him a very large allowance, he had got monstrously into debt; and now he had been sent down [5, p. 325].

"I rather wanted to be a painter when I was a boy, but my father made me go into business because he said there was no money in art..." [6]

It was not till he was twenty years old that the family could ever afford to go away for a holiday. Mrs. Morel had never been away for a holiday, except to see her sister, since she had been married. Now at last Paul had saved enough money, and they were all going. [4, p. 174]

The first quoted excerpt presents two coherence relations: the first clause offers the *cause* for the character's dismissal from the university announced in the last clause of the sentence (*and now he had been sent down*); then follows a relation of *concession*, i.e. the third clause (*he had got monstrously into debt*) denies the expectation raised by the second clause (*his father had given him a very large allowance*). In the second sample a negative relation is signaled by the contrastive connective *but*. The second clause (*but my father made me go into business*) is the *consequence* of the last part of the sentence (*because he said there was no money in art*). The last extract displays the relation of *enablement*: Paul's action of saving enough money made it possible for his family to go away for a holiday.

Coherence relations may be left implicit, or they may be marked explicitly through the use of connectives which consists of subordinating conjunctions (because, if, although), coordinating conjunctions (and, but), conjunctive adverbs (so, therefore, yet) and conjunctive adverbial phrases (as a consequence, in contrast with this). Current theories of text linguistics claim that the same coherence relations that can occur between clauses can also occur between larger text segments, such as paragraphs and even complete sections [3, p. 190]. The specification of coherence relations depends on genre or text type. In literary narratives the addressee expects events to be causally related and, consequently, it is fairly common to leave causal relations underspecified in these types of texts.

The basis of coherence of literary works was introduced in Aristotle's *Poetics*, emphasis being laid on unity of plot with a beginning, middle, and an end, unity of incident, the developing structure by means of complications followed by a denouement. The criterion of *common sense knowledge* advanced by Robert de Beaugrande is insufficient for judging texts as coherent or incoherent. According to Toolan, stories that do not come up to readers' expectations about time, goal, causality, ending may fail to arouse their interest and be deemed as incomplete or incoherent. But difficulties in text understanding generated by anachrony, or unwarranted shifts in setting or character, scarce denomination systems do not amount to incoherence, as norms concerning narrative coherence are dependent on the society, culture, as well as period and genre [8]. The readers' competences and their cultural background are essential in tracking narrative coherence. Readers who are knowledgeable about the ensemble of narrative techniques used in the text by the author are able to complete the blanks or solve the indeterminacies, thus restoring the unity of the text. Besides, in literary works, cohesion may be deliberately precluded in order to enhance readers' involvement in discovering the missing links for themselves. Building coherence of a text is a cognitive process which implies the interaction of text- presented

knowledge with people's stored knowledge of the world. Narratologists acknowledge the status of coherence as both a textual property and an activity on the part of the reader. Therefore coherence is a pragmatically-determined quality, requiring close attention to the specific sense made of the text in the cultural context.

There are degrees of coherence, varying from the minimal to the maximal [8]. In the case of narratives, there are generic norms that guide coherence, such as the presence of story or plot, the development of an inter-related sequence of fictional events, the focus on one or a few characters undergoing change, and the presence of a situation of stability developing disequilibrium, following which a renewed but altered equilibrium emerges (closure). Coherent texts are based on values which a classical reader expects in a text, i.e. linearity of the narrative, transparency of meaning, and continuity of plot. Such texts do not contain irrelevant details or complex symbols, their endings completely comply with the readers' expectations. The elliptical, the implied, the unsaid but inferable, on the one hand, and overabundant texts characterized by a surplus of information that has to be managed through showing its relevance to general patterns, on the other hand, represent complications that defy coherence in narratives [7, p. 148-152].

Among other challenges to coherence, Michael Toolan includes free indirect discourse, which comprises two deictic centers ascribed to two different narrative entities – character and narrator, bearers of distinct points of view, metaphor where readers fail to detect it, thus precluding the perception of coherence, hyperbole, litotes, irony, sarcasm, metalepsis, unreliability, which leads to ambiguity [8]. At the opposite pole of coherence continuum lie “texts” comprising randomly connected sentences, with equally random sequencing of unrelated words within those sentences which defy any ability of the reader to construct the meaning behind the text. Plot twists which involve discontinuity of character, time, place, and event-sequencing caused by a sudden tragedy or comedy represent another kind of coherence-challenge to narratives. Time analysis categories, such as frequency and order, can also amount to text inconsistencies. Repetitive telling, i.e. recounting several times what happened once, and anachrony, i.e. a deviation from strict chronology in a story through flashbacks or flashforwards, disturb the linearity of the text. Consider the following examples:

An outburst of anger near the road, a refusal to speak on the path, a silence in the pine woods, a silence across the old railroad bridge, an attempt to be friendly in the water, a refusal to end the argument on the flat stones, a cry of anger on the steep bank of dirt, a weeping among the bushes [2].

Nearly every morning, a certain woman in our community comes running out of her house with her face white and her overcoat flapping wildly. She cries out, "Emergency, emergency," and one of us runs to her and holds her until her fears are calmed. We know she is making it up; nothing has really happened to her. But we understand, because there is hardly one of us who has not been moved at some time to do just what she has done, and every time, it has taken all our strength, and even the strength of our friends and families too, to quiet us [2].

The presented texts display different degrees of coherence. The second example is highly cohesive as it presents a plot unfolding around a central character that experiences a conflict. Except structural elements, the unity of the story is ensured by cohesive means, such as anaphoric reference, repetition, and junction.

The first text, on the contrary, is characterized by a low degree of explicit coherence. The unusual plot design and deviation from the norms of textual composition challenge the canons of text coherence and, therefore, require of readers great sense-making skills in order to comprehend the text. The first difficulty the reader faces is the general uncertainty as to what happens in the story. What is the text about? It contains an enumeration of barely related actions rendered linguistically through noun phrases. There is no exposition or any character introduced. The only given element of the story is the setting. The reader, activating his knowledge, deduces through inference that that implied actions take place somewhere in nature *near the road, on the path, in the pine woods, across the old railroad bridge, in the water*, etc. as the title of the story “*An Outing*” also suggests it. Based on the norms of cohesion and common knowledge about the

norms/patterns of behaviour that the readers possess and apply for understanding the textual world, they can infer the unifying idea for the whole text: an argument that had happened between the alleged characters and their attempts end it. The cohesive links that help them draw these inferences are supplied by the thematic chain of argument that includes paraphrase (*refusal to speak/silence*), repetition (*refusal to speak, refusal to end*) and near synonymy (*outburst of anger, cry of anger a weeping*).

Having considered the standard of coherence in literary narratives from the standpoint of text linguistics, cognitive and narrative approaches, it can be claimed that its realization in literary narratives is based on various logico-semantic relations at the micro level of the text as well as on compositional patternings ascribed to the macro level of the narrative, i.e. unity of plot elements, linearity of action sequencing and overall narrative perspective. The readers' knowledge of the world, their skills to draw inferences, fill in the ellipsis and focus on contextually pertinent information are essential in deifying the challenges to coherence that characterize literary narratives and, consequently, perceive the overarching meaning of the text.

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